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Pathways to Success: Factors Influencing Persistence and Academic Performance of Ethnic Minority Students at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract

This study examines academic performance and persistence among ethnic minority university students in Vietnam, where structural inequalities continue to shape access and outcomes in higher education. Guided by Tinto's integration model, Astin's Input–Environment–Outcome framework, and Self-Determination Theory, the study uses a mixed-methods design combining academic records (N = 286) with semi-structured interviews. Quantitative results show that grade point average (GPA) is significantly associated with gender, ethnicity, region, financial support, and program, with female and financially supported students achieving higher outcomes. Students from the most disadvantaged regions demonstrated unexpectedly strong performance, suggesting the effectiveness of targeted institutional support. Qualitative findings reveal that autonomous motivation, family encouragement, and peer and faculty relationships sustain persistence. Together, the results indicate that structural conditions and motivational processes operate interactively rather than independently. The study highlights the importance of culturally responsive institutional support, financial stability, and relational networks in promoting equitable student success in Vietnamese higher education.

***Keywords**:* Ethnic minority students; higher education; academic performance; persistence; student success; motivation; self-determination.

Introduction

Higher education generates long-term cognitive, social, and economic benefits for individuals and societies (OECD, 2025; World Bank, 2022). In Vietnam's rapidly expanding knowledge economy, a university degree has become a key pathway to upward mobility and national development (Nguyen et al., 2020). Ensuring equitable participation in higher education is therefore both an educational and a social priority (Phan & Nguyen, 2025).

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic nation comprising 54 ethnic groups, of which the Kinh constitute the majority. The remaining 53 ethnic minority (EM) groups are concentrated primarily in mountainous and rural regions, where limited educational infrastructure, economic hardship, and linguistic barriers constrain access to opportunities (Phan & Nguyen, 2025). According to the General Statistics Office (GSO, 2019), 86.2% of EM populations live in rural areas and nearly 90% reside in officially designated minority zones, many of which are classified as extremely disadvantaged due to geographic isolation and poor infrastructure. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2025), although national higher education enrollment expanded from 1.7 million students in 2017 to 2.3 million in 2023, EM participation has not kept pace. During this period, EM enrollment increased only modestly from approximately 104,000 to 141,000 students despite targeted policy

supports such as tuition exemptions and preferential admissions under Decree No. 81/2021/ND-CP (MOET, 2025; Phan & Nguyen, 2025). In 2022, EM students accounted for only 5.84% of undergraduates nationwide (Tuong San, 2024). These structural disparities intersect with individual characteristics, such as ethnicity, regional origin, and first-generation college status, to shape students' academic preparedness, sense of belonging, and persistence in higher education (Le et.al., 2020).

Beyond access, disparities persist after enrollment. Research in Vietnam shows that EM students tend to have lower grade point averages (GPAs) and higher dropout risks than their Kinh peers (Tran, 2017). Such patterns reflect the combined influence of academic demands, financial pressures, and challenges of social integration. Academic performance, commonly measured through GPA, is a multidimensional construct shaped by prior achievement, motivation, and cognitive readiness (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Westrick et al., 2015), as well as non-academic factors such as financial stability, peer interaction, and institutional engagement (Li & Qiu, 2018; Rodríguez-Hernández et al., 2020). For EM students, these academic and non-academic forces often converge, amplifying existing disadvantage.

Empirical research consistently highlights the role of family background, peer networks, and faculty support in shaping student outcomes (Manir & Deshpande, 2023; Wang, 2022). In Vietnam, EM students frequently enter university with fewer academic and financial resources than their Kinh counterparts (Iyer et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). While structural barriers refer to unequal access to educational infrastructure and preparatory opportunities (Duncan & Murnane, 2014), psychological barriers involve students' beliefs about belonging, academic self-efficacy, and motivation (Rožman et al., 2025). International research suggests that these structural and psychological mechanisms jointly influence persistence among underrepresented students across various contexts. By situating the Vietnamese case within this broader landscape, the present study contributes insights relevant not only to national policy but also to global discussions of equity and student persistence.

Although prior studies document disparities in access and outcomes among EM students in Vietnam, most research focuses either on descriptive enrollment patterns or small-scale qualitative accounts (Iyer et al., 2021; Le et al., 2020; Tran, 2017). There is limited integrated evidence explaining how structural conditions, institutional environments, and motivational processes jointly shape persistence and academic performance. The absence of multi-level, mixed-methods analyses restricts understanding of how disadvantage translates into educational trajectories and limits efforts to promote equitable student success.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines how demographic, academic, socioeconomic, and motivational factors interact to influence EM students' university outcomes. Guided by Tinto's Model of Student Integration, Astin's Input–Environment–Outcome (I–E–O) framework, and Self-Determination Theory, the study links structural conditions with students' lived experiences. Using a mixed-methods design, it combines administrative academic records with semi-structured interviews to capture both performance patterns and student perspectives. Beyond identifying predictors of academic performance, the study explicitly seeks to challenge deficit-oriented assumptions that portray EM students as inherently underperforming. It reframes success as contingent on persistence, relational support, and institutional contexts rather than fixed student characteristics. Integrating macro-level inequalities with individual motivational processes, the study contributes evidence relevant to Vietnamese higher education policy and to broader global discussions on equity and student persistence.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do demographic, academic, and socioeconomic factors affect academic performance among Vietnamese EM university students?
2. How do motivational beliefs and self-regulation processes mediate EM students' persistence and academic performance?

Literature Review

Factors Influencing Student Academic Performance

Academic performance has long been a central concern of educational research because it reflects the extent to which students master course content, achieve expected learning outcomes, and progress toward degree completion (Hamann et al., 2020). In Vietnamese higher education, academic achievement is typically measured by GPA. Yet performance is not a simple GPA outcome; it is shaped by the interaction of educational, socioeconomic, and individual determinants that vary across contexts

and student populations (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Li & Qiu, 2018; Liu et al., 2022; Luong & Nguyen, 2024; Lynam et al., 2024; Wang & Chen, 2025).

A substantial body of research identifies demographic background, academic preparation, and socioeconomic status (SES) as significant predictors of university success (Liu et al., 2022; Maduwanthi et al., 2015; Wang & Chen, 2025). Prior academic preparation strongly influences early university performance, while factors such as gender, ethnicity, and parental education continue to influence students' academic progression (He et al., 2024; Le et al., 2020; McClusky & Allen, 2023).

Studies in Vietnam and similar contexts show that regional and cultural backgrounds strongly shape EM students' engagement and academic progress, especially for those from rural or mountainous areas who face structural and psychological barriers to persistence (Luong & Nguyen, 2024; Tran, 2017). These challenges reflect variations in personal and contextual circumstances that create distinct obstacles to accessing and sustaining university study (Stough-Hunter & Lekies, 2023). Background factors also influence socialization: SES, aptitude, preferences, and aspirations predict EM students' adjustment (Luong & Nguyen, 2024), and earlier research shows that social and psychological barriers limit minority students' interaction and participation (Le et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Motivation plays a central role in shaping academic outcomes (Liu et.al., 2019). Isik et al. (2018) identify cognitive skills, personality traits, well-being, ethnic identity, and acculturation as key contributors to minority students' motivation, with ethnic identity and acculturation underscoring the need for culturally responsive teaching. Gender differences also emerge, as minority women often exhibit higher intrinsic motivation linked to engagement and persistence (Caratiquit & Caratiquit, 2023; Liu et.al., 2019). Feelings of belonging further strengthen motivation (Martin, 2012), while recent United States (U.S.) data continue to reveal ethnic disparities in dropout rates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024).

Support systems are equally important. Family, peer, and institutional support enhance motivation and academic resilience, whereas family adversity weakens persistence (Isik et al., 2018). Peer and family support have stronger effects on academic performance than teaching approaches or financial conditions (Nawi et al., 2023). Teacher support and a positive academic climate help maintain motivation, while academic probation or low grades diminish it (Isik et al., 2018).

Financial conditions form an additional determinant. Financial stability supports academic focus, whereas financial hardship, which is common among disadvantaged groups, predicts weaker performance and higher dropout risk (Norazlan et al., 2020). Globally, SES remains a strong predictor of achievement due to its influence on learning resources, parental involvement, and cultural capital (Reardon, 2018).

Despite this growing body of work, existing research remains fragmented. Many studies examine demographic or socioeconomic predictors of performance in isolation, while others focus on motivation or identity through small-scale qualitative designs. Few studies integrate structural, institutional, and motivational dimensions within a single analytical framework, particularly for EM students in Vietnam. As a result, current evidence explains disparities but offers limited insight into how disadvantaged students persist and succeed within supportive environments. There is a need for mixed-methods research that connects performance data with students' lived experiences to clarify how structural conditions and motivational processes operate together. The present study addresses this gap by combining administrative academic records with qualitative accounts to provide a multi-level explanation of EM student success.

Theoretical Frameworks

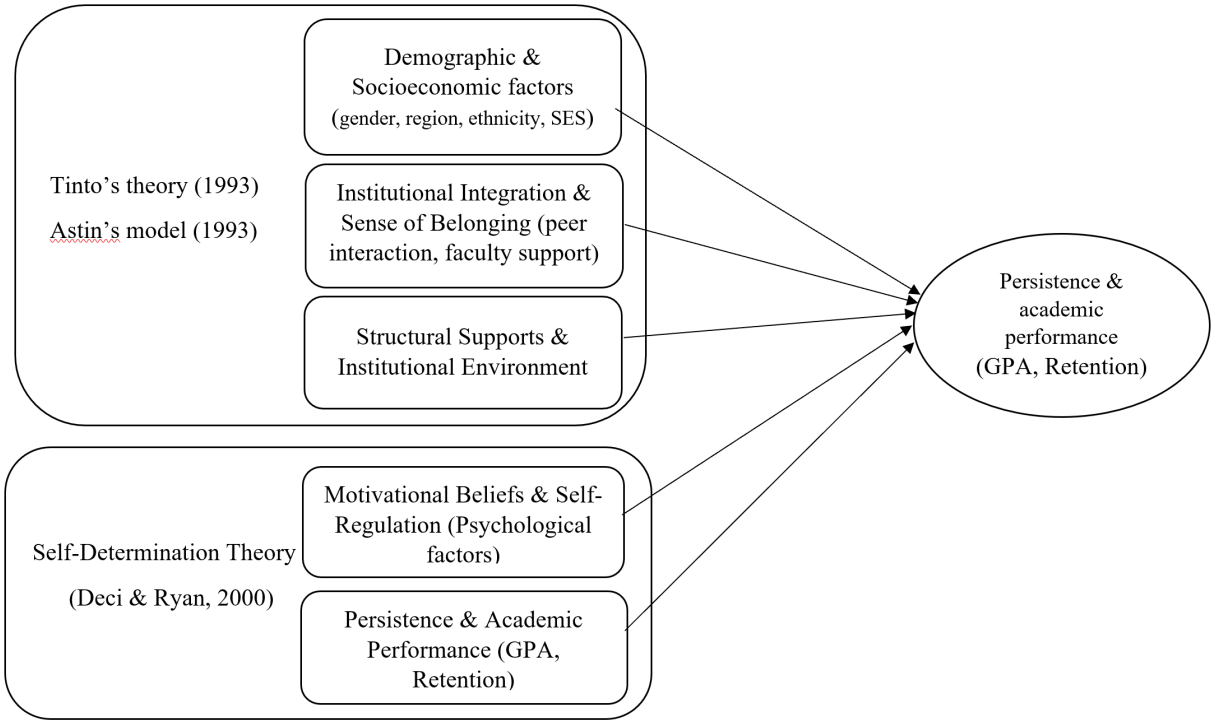
This study draws on Tinto's Model of Student Integration (1993), Astin's I–E–O model (1993), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to interpret the factors shaping EM students' academic experiences. Tinto (1993) provides a structural lens, emphasizing how pre-entry attributes such as socioeconomic background, schooling, and academic preparation interact with academic and social integration to influence persistence. Importantly, Tinto situates persistence within broader social inequality: students enter higher education with unequal resources, and institutional structures can either reproduce or mitigate those disparities. Retention therefore reflects not only individual preparation but institutional inclusiveness and responsibility toward diverse learners.

Astin's (1993) I–E–O model complements this perspective by highlighting how students' initial characteristics interact with the institutional environment — including pedagogy, campus climate, and peer engagement — to produce outcomes. Applied

to EM students, the framework shifts attention from individual deficit to the design of learning environments that enable equity, belonging, and development. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) adds a motivational dimension, explaining how fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustains persistence, while unmet needs can suppress engagement, particularly in structurally disadvantaged contexts. Together, these frameworks conceptualize EM student success as an institutional and relational achievement rather than an inherent student trait, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Integrated Framework of Structural and Motivational Factors Shaping Ethnic Minority Student Persistence and Performance



Research Design

The study was conducted at a South-Central Vietnamese university enrolling 286 EM students. Socioeconomic classifications follow national regional categories defined in Decision 861/QD-TTg (2021), which group communes (xã: is the lowest-level, rural administrative subdivision) by poverty and development indicators. Most participants came from Region I (poverty rate below 10%), while approximately 6% were from Region III, the most disadvantaged category whose students receive the highest educational support. The remaining students were from Region II, representing intermediate socioeconomic conditions.

This study employed a mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately and then integrated to provide a comprehensive interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The quantitative component involved descriptive statistics and regression analyses conducted using the R statistical environment. Normality was assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests, and Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were applied when parametric assumptions were not met. Predictor variables included geographic origin, financial support status, ethnicity, and gender. Archived academic records enabled identification of measurable performance patterns but could not capture internal processes such as motivation, identity, or perceived belonging.

To address this limitation, qualitative interviews explored students' motivation, financial circumstances, and experiences of academic and social integration. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases reflecting EM students' persistence and performance (Patton, 2002). Selection criteria ensured diversity across gender, ethnicity, study programs, years

of study, socioeconomic region, financial aid status, and housing arrangements. Fifteen participants were drawn from the quantitative cohort to represent variation in background characteristics and access to institutional support.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Google Meet depending on participant preference. Participants provided informed consent, and interviews were recorded and anonymized in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. This design enabled focused exploration of how differing social and educational contexts shape academic persistence while supporting analytic transferability.

The semi-structured protocol followed a flexible thematic guide addressing educational background, motivation, integration, institutional support, and cultural identity. Open-ended prompts encouraged participants to narrate lived experiences of persistence and belonging while ensuring coverage of key conceptual constructs. After the interviews, four researchers independently coded transcripts and reconciled differences through discussion to enhance analytic trustworthiness. Thematic analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and methodological triangulation (Morgan, 2022) strengthened validity.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The dataset included academic records from 286 students; the demographic composition of the sample is reported in Table 1. GPA ranged from 0.07 to 9.05, with a slightly left-skewed distribution (M = 5.73, Mdn = 6.02, IQR = 5.02–6.91). Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated non-normality; therefore, Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were used for group comparisons.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 286)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	160	55.9
	Male	126	44.1
Region	Region I	178	62.2
	Region II	29	10.1
	Region III	17	5.9
	Other regions	62	21.7
Ethnicity	Chăm	150	52.4
	Hoa	38	13.3
	Mường/Tày	31	10.8
	Others	67	23.4

Across demographic, academic, and socioeconomic variables, several patterns emerged (see Table 2). Female students outperformed males, and students in Social Sciences / Economics / Management programs (EML) scored higher than those in Technology / Engineering (ET). Ethnic differences were evident, with Hoa students achieving the highest GPA, while students in the Other ethnic category had the lowest. Regional variation was pronounced: Region III students had the highest and most consistent GPAs, whereas the Other region category showed the lowest and most variable performance. Financially supported students scored higher than unsupported peers. Active students substantially outperformed those who eventually dropped out.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Group Differences in GPA

Variable	Mean GPA (Groups)	Key Findings
Gender	6.12 (F) / 5.24 (M)	Female > Male ($p < .001$)
Program	6.12 (EML) / 5.51 (ET)	EML > ET ($p = .002$)
Ethnicity	6.02 (Hoa), 5.83 (Chăm), 5.61 (Mường/Tày), 5.42 (Other)	Hoa > Chăm ($p = .002$)
Region	6.44 (III), 5.98 (II), 5.69 (I), 5.54 (Other)	III > I ($p < .05$)
Financial Support	6.53 (Yes) / 5.64 (No)	Supported > Unsupported ($p < .01$)
Student Status	6.06 (Active) / 3.83 (Dropout)	Active > Dropout ($p < .001$)

Regression Analysis

To isolate the independent effects of each factor, a multiple linear regression model was fitted using gender, program, ethnicity, region, financial support, admission type, and student status as predictors. The model explained a substantial proportion of GPA variance ($R^2 = .352$; Adjusted $R^2 = .325$; $p < .001$), with detailed regression coefficients presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Multivariate Linear Regression Predicting GPA

Predictor Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
(Intercept)	6.53	< .001	Baseline GPA for reference categories
Female	+0.61	.002	Higher GPA compared to males
ET Program	-0.42	.045	Lower GPA compared to EML students
Ethnicity: Hoa	+1.04	.002	Higher GPA vs. Chăm students
Region III	+0.75	.051	Marginally higher GPA
Region: Other	-0.74	.006	Lower GPA vs. Region I
No Financial Aid	-0.55	.070	Marginal effect
Dropped Out	-2.23	< .001	Strong negative effect

Other ethnicity and region categories were not significant predictors.

Nested model comparisons showed that adding student status sharply improved model fit and revealed that dropout status partially mediated program and financial support effects. After controlling for status, females, Hoa students, and EML majors maintained significant advantages.

In summary, patterns across demographic, academic, and socioeconomic dimensions indicate that GPA is shaped by a complex interplay of gender, program type, ethnicity, region, financial aid, and persistence. Student status — active versus dropout — was the most powerful predictor, highlighting the central role of retention in academic outcomes.

Qualitative Findings

To better understand internal and contextual dimensions influencing EM students' academic performance, qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 participants selected from the quantitative cohort (N = 286). Participants represented diverse ethnic communities, including Chăm, Hoa, Tày, Nùng, Êđê, Khmer, Cơ Ho, Rắc Lây, Mường, and M'Nông (see Table 4).

Table 4

Interviewed Participant Demographics

Variable	Category	n
Gender	Female (F)	10
	Male (M)	5
Ethnicity	Chăm	6
	Tày, Nùng, Êđê, Cơ Ho, M'Nông, Khmer, Hoa, Rắc Lây, Mường	9 (1 each)
First-Generation Status	First-Gen	12
	Non-First-Gen	3
Parental Education	High School or below	11
	College	4
Region	Region I	5
	Region II	6
	Region III	4
Financial Aid	Yes	8
	No	7
On-Campus Housing	Yes	9
	No	6

Twelve of the 15 participants were first-generation university students. Most came from Regions II and III, which are classified as disadvantaged or extremely disadvantaged areas, and many relied on financial aid and on-campus housing. A smaller group from Region I reported greater family resources and did not receive institutional support. These demographic patterns illustrate how participants' backgrounds varied across socioeconomic region, first-generation status, and access to support.

Self as the Primary Agent and Family as a Warm Supportive Base

Across interviews, students positioned themselves as the primary decision-makers in their academic journeys, while describing their families as emotionally supportive rather than authoritative actors. Participants consistently framed their educational choices as self-initiated, emphasizing ownership over their learning trajectories. As one student explained, "The person who made the decision for my learning and my academic path is myself. Moreover, the people who always support and stand by me are my family" (Student 2). Family involvement was characterized as advisory but non-directive, allowing students to retain decisional control: "My mother also gave me advice … and I was the one who made the final decision" (Student 7). This pattern suggests that students experience family support as autonomy-affirming rather than controlling, enabling them to maintain a strong sense of personal agency while benefiting from emotional backing.

For several students, parental education became a source of motivation rather than a limitation: "My parents' educational level is not high …. That is why my family wants me to try to study and to do the things they have not been able to" (Student 1). In one case, a student who worked in a factory for two years before enrolling described higher education as an escape from hardship and a route to self-improvement: "If I continued working in the factory, my future would be very confined" (Student4). Her case illustrates identified regulation**,** valuing education as a self-endorsed goal, and demonstrates that autonomy can emerge through resilience and real-life struggle as much as through familial support. These narratives reveal strong self-determination and resilience grounded in both personal ambition and family encouragement.

Academic and Social Integration Through Collaborative Support and Dormitory Life

Collaboration with peers and teachers was central to adjustment. As one student noted, "The connection with teachers and friends helps me achieve more effective learning results" (Student 8). Dormitory life provided daily academic and emotional support: "Friends in the same room and nearby rooms are close-knit; it's easier to talk and exchange lessons" (Student 1). Participation in clubs further strengthened engagement: "I can both learn and communicate with friends" (Student 13). Structured interaction and communal living facilitated gradual integration for all students.

Institutional Support as the Foundation of Persistence and Integration

Across all accounts, institutional support emerged as the single most decisive factor shaping persistence and engagement. Financial aid was widely regarded as more than material help — it was a signal of care and recognition. As one participant explained, "The school has supported me with 70% of the tuition ... it makes my studies much lighter financially" (Student 10). Others echoed that such assistance boosted their morale: "Receiving the school's support helps me be more motivated because I see that the school cares about me" (Student 11).

However, the data also reveal the fragility of this support system. Some students, even with substantial tuition waivers, still faced pressure to work part time, jeopardizing academic focus: "I still work about four hours a day ... it affects my study time" (Student 11). This underscores the precarious balance between financial stability and persistence. Beyond financial aid, students highlighted the importance of faculty support. One student stated, "My academic advisor is very concerned about my ethnicity ... she always helps me" (Student 4). However, students also cited bureaucratic obstacles, such as rigid procedures and unexpected tuition adjustments, as demotivating, underscoring the dual nature of institutions as both supportive and constraining.

Ethnic Identity as a Source of Belonging and Empowerment

Contrary to deficit narratives which depict minority identity as a barrier, participants in this study viewed their ethnicity as a source of pride, belonging, and empowerment. Rather than facing discrimination, most experienced openness and curiosity from peers and instructors.

"At first, I thought there would be discrimination, but when I came up, I saw it was different ... friends are very friendly" (Student 3). Sharing cultural traditions became a bridge for inclusion: "In Chinese class, the teacher invited me to introduce my culture, and the whole class listened attentively; I felt so proud" (Student 6). Such experiences transformed cultural distinctiveness into social capital, enhancing visibility and confidence.

Many participants felt valued for their heritage: "Ethnicity is not my concern. That makes me proud and more open. I feel treated equally and friendly" (Student 10). Even when ethnicity was not a salient factor: "People care less about this issue ... . They are just a little surprised" (Student 10), students experienced a neutral, respectful environment that allowed them to invest energy fully in learning.

In summary, across interviews, participants, particularly those from Regions II and III, described education as a shared family aspiration tied to hopes for upward mobility. Even when parents had limited schooling, students emphasized that families consistently encouraged persistence and framed university study as a collective investment in the household's future. Several participants connected their motivation directly to a desire to improve family circumstances and repay parental sacrifice. For students from Region III, who often relied on dormitory housing and financial support, campus residence and peer networks were described as stabilizing environments that enabled sustained focus on study. These accounts suggest that geographic disadvantage coexisted with strong relational encouragement and institutional scaffolding, shaping persistence in ways that extend beyond economic factors alone.

Discussion

This mixed-methods study examined how structural and motivational factors jointly shape EM students' academic performance and persistence in Vietnam. Quantitative analyses identified key demographic and socioeconomic predictors of GPA and retention, including gender, program, financial support, and region (RQ1). Qualitative interviews then illuminated how agency, family encouragement, peer collaboration, and institutional support mediate persistence through motivation and self-regulation (RQ2). Together, the findings show that outcomes emerge from the interaction between structural conditions and lived student experiences and echo global patterns of minority student success.

RQ1: How do demographic, academic, and socioeconomic factors affect academic performance among Vietnamese EM university students?

The quantitative component revealed that gender, academic program, ethnicity, region of origin, financial support, and student status (continuing vs. dropout) significantly predicted GPA outcomes. For example, dropout status was by far the strongest negative predictor of GPA ($\beta = -2.23$, $p < .001$), while female gender ($\beta = +0.61$, $p = .002$) and Hoa ethnicity ($\beta = +1.04$, $p = .002$) remained significant even after controlling for other factors. The finding that female students outperformed their male peers aligns not only with Vietnam-based research (Nguyen et al., 2020) but also with international evidence. For example, Lydster (2024) reports that female students in Australia were significantly more likely than males to maintain high academic achievement. This convergence suggests a broader cross-national trend in gendered patterns of university success.
Financial support also emerged as a strong positive factor, consistent with Moores and Burgess (2023) and de Sivatte and Gabaldón (2023). Their studies show that financial aid recipients in Europe achieved higher GPAs than non-recipients. These parallels highlight that the role of financial aid in supporting underrepresented groups is not unique to Vietnam but resonates across diverse educational systems.

RQ2: How do motivational beliefs and self-regulation processes mediate EM students' persistence and academic performance?

While RQ1 identifies structural predictors of performance, the qualitative data explain how students translate disadvantage into persistence through motivational and relational processes. Notably, students from Region III, classified as extremely disadvantaged areas, exhibited higher and more consistent GPAs in the quantitative analysis. Interviews revealed that many interpreted higher education as a shared family responsibility, demonstrating how structural hardship coexisted with strong commitment to persistence. Similar resilience patterns among under-resourced minority students have been documented internationally (Banda et al., 2023; Barney, 2018), where community ties and institutional scaffolding transform hardship into academic continuity.

Participants repeatedly attributed persistence to dormitory-based peer collaboration, close faculty relationships, and financial stability. These supports fostered belonging, academic confidence, and help-seeking behaviors, particularly for first-generation students navigating unfamiliar institutional environments. This mirrors international findings emphasizing culturally grounded peer and faculty networks as key mechanisms supporting minority students' progression (Barney, 2018; López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; McClusky & Allen, 2023).

The qualitative findings also illuminate how motivation operates through family relationships. Students described a family culture that valued education despite limited parental schooling and interpreted parental sacrifice as a responsibility to persist and pursue upward mobility. These dynamics align with Self-Determination Theory and Tinto's persistence framework, which emphasize autonomy, belonging, and commitment as interacting drivers of engagement. Comparable patterns appear in other minority contexts, where emotional family support sustains persistence despite limited academic guidance (Moosa & Aloka, 2023; Reid & Davidson, 2022). The Vietnamese cases extend this evidence by showing how family pride, institutional support, and self-driven aspirations function together as embedded motivational resources.

Overall, the study demonstrates that structural factors (ethnicity, region, financial support, program) and relational–motivational factors (family encouragement, peer support, autonomy, aspirations) are deeply interconnected in shaping persistence and performance. This interplay, evident in the Vietnamese context, aligns strongly with global research and contributes to a broader understanding of how institutions can strengthen minority student success through culturally grounded, motivationally supportive, and structurally equitable approaches.

Conclusion

This study shows that EM students' performance and persistence in Vietnam emerge from the interaction between structural demographics and motivational processes. While gender, program, ethnicity, region, financial support, and student status shape observable outcomes, motivation, self-regulation, and institutional integration explain how students navigate and sometimes transcend disadvantage. The relatively strong performance of Region III students illustrates that hardship is not

deterministic: when institutional environments provide stable support and satisfy motivational needs, students from the most disadvantaged areas can achieve high outcomes.

Implications

The findings suggest clear institutional priorities. Targeted financial aid should be sustained and expanded, as it functions both as material support and as a signal of belonging. On-campus housing and peer-learning communities are especially important for students transitioning from remote regions, strengthening integration and relatedness. Program-level retention strategies, such as early mentoring, collaborative learning, and self-regulation training, may stabilize persistence in high-dropout disciplines. Institutions would benefit from tracking not only GPA and demographics but also support-environment indicators such as housing access, aid continuity, and peer engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of a mixed-methods design, several limitations should be acknowledged. The quantitative model explains approximately 35% of GPA variance ($R^2 = .352$), indicating that important influences, such as prior academic preparation, instructional quality, or psychological traits, remain unmeasured. Institutional focus and uneven subgroup representation limit generalizability, and the qualitative sample cannot capture all minority experiences. Cross-sectional data also prevent causal inference. Future research should use longitudinal, multi-institutional designs; include direct measures of self-regulation and belonging; and examine intersectional dynamics across gender, ethnicity, program, and region. Integrating administrative data with student narratives will remain essential for building equity-oriented systems that convert access into sustained success.

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